

ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

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ABSTRACT

The author surveys the Islamic education system in Kyrgyzstan after the republic gained its independence, assesses its current state and the problems relating to this sphere, and offers her recommendations on how to upgrade its efficiency.

KEYWORDS: *Kyrgyzstan, Islamic education, Islamic university, Islamic institute, madrasahs, faculty of theology, Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, mudaris, imam-khatib, muftiat, State Commission for Religious Affairs, Islamic educational establishments.*

Introduction

The atheist ideology of Soviet times collapsed to give way to revived religiosity in Kyrgyzstan: the number of legal religious establishments and organizations is on the rise. The Constitution and the legal documents relating to the freedom of conscience and religion have been readjusted according to international regulations.

The republic's liberal legislation¹ and the efforts of local Muslims and foreign missionaries over the 20-odd years of independence have helped Kyrgyzstan arrive at Islamic diversity.

According to the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), in January 2013, there were 1,791 Islamic establishments in Kyrgyzstan: 9 kaziats, 1,674 mosques, 10 higher religious educational institutions, 67 madrasahs, 49 Islamic funds, centers, and alliances, and 3 missions of foreign confessions.² The growing number of Muslim cultic and educational establishments speaks of the rising religiosity and popularity of Islam.

The Muslim community, which is actively seeking ways and means to become involved in public and political life, has set up all sorts of Islamic NGOs engaged in human rights, education, and the social sphere: AdepBashaty, Dil-Murogu, Mutakallim, Islakh, Taiba, the Congress of the Central Asian Muslims, etc. They are working toward a revival of Islamic traditions and culture and promoting the interests of the country's religious majority.

¹ See: Law of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations of 16 December, 1991, No. 657-XII, *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 1 February, 1992.

² See: Current records of SCRA KR. Spravka o kolichestve religioznykh organizatsiy v KR na 01.12.2013 g.

At the same time, the religious sphere has acquired many problems created by the disintegrated economy, mass poverty, deep-cutting spiritual crisis, and mounting social tension. The state structures are deeply concerned: the banned Islamic political parties and movements (Hizb ut-Tahrir, IMU, and Aqromiyya), extremist Jihadist-Taqfir-like movements (Jaishul Mahdi, Djund-ul-Khalifat, Ansa-rullah, and At-Taqfir-Wal Hijra), apolitical international structures (Tablighi Jamaat, Nurzhiler, Akhmadiyya, and others), and the violent extremism of proselytes are stirring up a lot of problems that call for urgent attention.

They are causing disagreements among the republic's Muslims, intensifying the struggle for control in jamaats and for top posts and resources, spreading radical ideas, and pushing young people to engage in armed struggle and terrorist acts. Muftis have been appointed and replaced with kaleidoscopic speed: since 2010, several muftis were removed amid loud scandals that reverberated far and wide across the country, which did nothing for social stability in the country.

It should be said that there are two opposing opinions about the future of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. Some members of the political elite are openly religious and do not conceal their ideological preferences. They recommend making Islam, along with its principles and regulations, part of social life; their opponents prefer the formula "the less the better."

Both groups, however, are convinced that high-quality Islamic education is the right answer to many problems. The Muslim community needs clearly formulated rules and unambiguous legal, ethical, and ideological dividing lines drawn with due account for the specifics of the Hanafi madh-hab; much depends on the level of knowledge, theoretical background, and qualification of the clergy.

Islamic Education in Kyrgyzstan

Islamic education and its problems discussed in this article are very important for Kyrgyzstan and its post-Soviet Central Asian neighbors: about 80 percent of their religious population are Muslims.

At the turn of the 21st century, the scope of religious education in Kyrgyzstan increased: the functioning religious organizations started opening educational establishments to train clergy and to preserve and spread their religious doctrines and practices.

Whereas in the 1990s, the Kyrgyz Republic had no religious educational establishments, today, there are 93 of them: 77 are Islamic (1 university, 9 institutes, and 67 madrasahs) and 16 are Christian (7 higher and 9 secondary schools).

Religious education in Kyrgyzstan has lived through two stages.

- The first, from 1993 to 2008, created a wide and still widening network of Islamic educational establishments; corresponding administrative decisions were passed even faster.
- Since 2008, religious education is being institutionalized on a countrywide scale.

The Hazreti Umar Islamic Institute, the first educational establishment, was opened in Bishkek in May 1993 on the basis of the madrasah at the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK). Later, on 19 June, 2003, the 2nd Kurultay of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan transformed it into an Islamic University and appointed well-known spiritual leader Abdushukur Narmatov as its head.

The university (with 400 students studying annually) offers a five-year course given by 40-odd lecturers (some of them have PhD and Doctor of Science academic degrees); between 1993 and 2013, 197 students graduated with degrees in Islamic theology, the Shari'a, and Arabic.

It boasts of an excellent material and technical base, excellent library, and excellent professorate.

All sorts of foreign Muslim charities have given money and dispatched teachers to the first higher educational establishments in the republic.

In 1992, the Muradie Turkish cultural charity opened a madrasah, which was later transformed into the Arashan Institute of Theology. Its director, R. Shamilov, described its purpose as follows: “activists of the Turkish diaspora and compatriots working at Turkish offices in Kyrgyzstan were determined to help the children orphaned by the deplorable events in Osh.”

Very much in line with its stated purpose, the pupils could count on free accommodation, free food, and free training—a very attractive option for the generally impoverished population. Any teenager who wanted to study Islam, even if he did not contemplate it as his future profession, but was prepared to embrace it as a way of life, could apply and be accepted.

In 1993, the state set up several educational establishments together with Kuwait and Iran (the latter was soon closed because of lack of students), and Osh State University opened a theological (Islamic) faculty funded by the Turkish Diyanet Vakfi Foundation.

In 2007, I. Arabaev Kyrgyz State University opened a faculty of theology; in 2011, the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University did the same. These secular higher educational establishments offer education in full conformity with state standards formulated by the Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic, but the students are encouraged to follow the way of life of their foreign teachers, who strictly obey all Islamic norms.

In 1998, the republic acquired two Islamic institutes: Alim in the village of Ken-Bulun, Ysyk-Ata District, Chu Region and Khazreti Osmon in Kara-Balta.

A year later, the Abdyjapar Institute was opened in the village of Furkat, Kara-Suu District, Osh Region)

Three more Islamic institutes—Amir Khamza in Tash-Kumyr, Jalal-Abad Region; Lukman al-Khakim in Tokmak and Rasul Akram in Bishkek (Ulan quarter)—were opened in 2002.

In 2008, there were seven institutes in the KR: five functioned in the Chu Region and two in the Osh and Jalal-Abad regions; they offered tuition to 744 students. Forty-seven madrasahs were opened in different parts of the country: 14 in the Osh Region; 12 in the Chu Region; 10 in the Batken Region; 5 in the Jalal-Abad Region; 2 in the Naryn Region; 2 in the Talas Region; and 3 in Bishkek. The youth of the Issyk Kul Region, in which there were no higher or secondary Islamic educational establishments, was deprived of the chance to obtain a religious education.

On the whole, at that time, the number of madrasah students ranged from 15 in the smallest to 180 in the largest school.

It should be said that many of the Islamic educational establishments had to cope with numerous problems: there were not enough trained teachers; curricula were biased, the material and technical base practically non-existent, etc., which made it hard for the graduates to integrate into secular society.

By early 2014, 77 private Islamic educational structures hired 438 teachers and lecturers to educate 4,565 future Muslim clergy.³

The Islamic educational establishments that functioned from 1993 to 2013 trained 2,989 specialists (149 every year) qualified to serve as imam-khatibs, mudarises, kaarylyks, and experts in the Shari‘a and Arabic.⁴

³ See: Current records of the Committee of the Zhogorku Kenesh, Kyrgyz Republic, for Education, Science, Culture and Sport. “Kratkaia informatsia SAMK o sostoianii islamskogo obrazovania,” in: *Materialy Parlamentskogo slushania “O sostoianii religioznoy situatsii i religioznogo obrazovania v Kyrgyzskoy Respublike”*, 5 marta 2013 g.

⁴ Calculated by the author on the basis of the Current Records of SAMK by 1 March, 2013.

They were evenly spread across the country: there are 4 Islamic higher educational establishments, 35 madrasahs, and 1 parish school of the Russian Orthodox Church in the south and 6 Islamic higher educational establishments, 30 madrasahs, 7 Christian higher educational establishments, and 9 schools in the north.

The correlation between the share of Islamic educational establishments (82.8 percent of all educational establishments) and the share of the faithful Muslims (over 80 percent of the total population) looks justified. Christian educational establishments comprise 17.2 percent of the total number.

The steadily increasing number of Islamic educational structures has not been accompanied by rising teaching standards. In 2012, 4 institutes and 37 madrasahs (2 Islamic institutes and 8 madrasahs in the city of Osh and the Osh Region, 6 madrasahs in the Jalal-Abad Region, 3 madrasahs in the Batken Region; 1 madrasah in the Issyk Kul Region, 1 institute and 3 madrasahs in the Naryn Region, 3 madrasahs in the Talas Region, 1 institute and 14 madrasahs in the city of Bishkek and the Chu Region), which constituted over half of all Islamic religious educational establishments functioning in the country, were inspected for the quality of teaching.⁵

The workgroup was satisfied with the results: it reported that “there are very good Islamic higher educational establishments and educational structures with good accommodations, high level of teaching, and adequate material and technical base. On the other hand, some of the educational establishments are in a lamentable state with no basic living and teaching conditions.”⁶

The commission compiled a document which pointed out, in particular, that “the majority of the Islamic educational establishments were set up by our compatriots; they function on the money supplied by local people and parents. Several such structures have permanent sponsors among the foreign funds and religious organizations operating in the republic. Four of the inspected institutes and 37 madrasahs hire 287 teachers and lecturers with very different educational levels (there are self-educated people among them and also people with secondary and higher religious education); they teach 2,602 students aged between 16 and 27 (there are 707 girls among them, or about 27 percent of the total number) at day and evening courses.”⁷

When interviewed by the workgroup, the heads of all the educational structures asked for state financial and material support for their plans to add secular disciplines to their curricula and pointed out that they needed equipment, reduced prices on municipal services, etc.

The interdepartmental workgroup suggested that:

- Islamic universities and institutes accept only those students who have completed secondary education and can present corresponding documents and that the madrasahs accept students with no less than nine years at secondary schools;
- Donations and investments be accumulated to support institutes of Islamic education;
- The institutes and madrasahs work according to common educational standards and curricula;
- The pilot Islamic educational establishments be licensed on a voluntary basis with state support.”⁸

⁵ See: Current records of SCRA KR. Information about the results of studies of the state of religious education in the Kyrgyz Republic carried out by an Interdepartmental workgroup (set up in accordance with the decision of the Government of the KR of 28.02.2012 as a follow-up of resolution No. 61-p of ZhK of the KR “On the State and Development Prospects of Religious Education in the KR” of 04.11.2011 No. 1279-V.)

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

This means that at the first stage of their functioning (between 1993 and 2008), the Islamic educational structures demonstrated the following:

- Spontaneous growth of their number, which outstripped corresponding administrative decisions;
- Inadequate material base and shortage of teaching and methodological materials;
- Lack of permanent funding;
- No rules or clear legal, ethical, and ideological delimitations;
- Biased education that concentrated on religious disciplines; the curricula of Islamic institutes and madrasahs were practically identical;
- No qualified theologians and mudarises.

Problems and Contradictions Created by the Practice of Teaching Citizens of Kyrgyzstan in Foreign Islamic Educational Establishments

On the one hand, young men can freely enroll in religious educational establishments in other countries and travel on tourist visas, private invitations, and money provided by their parents, sponsors, or intermediaries. This means that religious freedom, liberal laws, and democracy have become facts of everyday life in the Kyrgyz Republic. On the other hand, this uncontrolled process contradicts the Decree of the President of the KR of 14 November, 1996⁹ and the Fatwa of the SAMK.

Most of those who study abroad prefer Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Russia, and other countries.

In 2004, 600 Kyrgyz citizens studied abroad; in the early 2014 there were about 577 of them (assessment by SCRA KR); between 2007 and 2012, 119 of them left the country according to the required procedure, while 458 travelled illegally. According to M. Murzabaev, who heads the analytical department of SCRA KR, “this information is not exhaustive because many people travelled on private invitations.” This means that young Kyrgyz prefer to study religion abroad.

The Islamic educational structures of Egypt, Al-Azhar al-Sharif University being the best in the Muslim world, have the largest number of Kyrgyz students; in fact, their number has been growing steadily from 185 in 2004 to 287 (an increase of 1.5-fold) in 2014.

Along with religious education, the university offers secular education at 41 faculties (medicine, agriculture, etc.) to students from more than 100 countries.

According to the officials of the 10th Main Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the KR (GU MVD KR), “theses graduates stand apart from many others by their moderate opinions

⁹ See: Decree of the President of the KR of 14 November, 1996 on Realization of the Rights of the Citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic to the Freedom of Conscience and Religion.

and loyalty to the official powers and the state. Recently, however, students have appeared who, after arriving in Egypt, refuse to enroll at Al-Azhar and study at private language courses controlled by Salafis.¹⁰ We should not forget that the position of banned radical Islamic organizations is fairly strong in Egypt.

Turkey is another attractive country. In 2004, there were 76 Kyrgyz studying at religious educational establishments in Turkey; in 2014, there are over 200 of them. Young Kyrgyz are attracted by Turkey's historical, linguistic, and geographic proximity, its secular government, and its reasonably good education. Graduates are much more secular-minded than those who studied in other countries.

Recently, experts¹¹ and clergy¹² have started talking about the Turkish model of relations between the state and religion as most suitable for Kyrgyzstan, with minor adjustments to its social, political, and cultural specifics.

It is suggested at the state level that imams should be treated as state officials: they should be paid wages and become eligible for old-age pensions.

Pakistan and its religious educational establishments hold third place as the most attractive option. From time to time, experts and analysts deem it necessary to warn about the dangers of Islamic education in little-known institutes. "This is especially true of Pakistan where the radical wing of the local clergy patronizes 10 to 15 thousand madrasahs."¹³ Judging by the steadily growing number of students—a three-fold increase (from 15 to 153) between 2004 and 2014—the warnings remained ignored. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the KR, many of the Kyrgyz students of private madrasahs in Pakistan coached by unofficial leaders join all sorts of non-traditional trends or the Tablighi Jamaat.¹⁴ Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, which have had a similar problem, deemed it necessary to recall their students.

Saudi Arabia, a country of prevailing Wahhabism, ranks fourth in terms of the number of students from Kyrgyzstan. Wahhabism belongs to the Hanbali maddhab of Sunni Islam; it is intolerant of novelties, rejects freedom of opinion in religion, and is extremely strict when it comes to everyday practices and Shari'a norms.

The Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (and the majority of the Muslims of the post-Soviet Central Asian states, for that matter) belong to the Hanafi theological and legal school of Abu Hanifah, a highly tolerant trend that accepts secular law as an additional and independent legal source. This simplified business practices and everyday life.

In the last ten years (between 2004 and 2014), the number of Kyrgyz students in Saudi Arabia has increased from 43 to 133. They prefer Islamic universities in big cities—Mecca, Medina and Al Riyadh—and graduate as confirmed Wahhabis of the Hanbali maddhab.

There is certain number of Kyrgyz students in Syria, Kuwait, Jordan, UAE, Libya, and Iran.

Not infrequently, small children (aged from 9 to 14) are sent abroad to study religion. I. Davuza, born in 1995, was sent to a Pakistani madrasah in Jamba Arabia. After 17 years of study, he could barely read or write.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ See: R. Weitzel, "Vliianie Turtsii na Islam v Tsentralnoy Azii," 1 November, 2013, available at [<http://www.islamsng.com/sng/analytics/7367>].

¹² See: "Kyrgyzstan: aktiviziruetsia deiatelnost religiozno-ekstremistskikh organizatsiy," 16 August, 2012, available at [<http://www.paruskg.info/2012/08/16/66789>].

¹³ V. Belokrenitskiy, "Krizis pakistanskoy gosudarstvennosti: primety i posledstvia," available at [http://www.perspektivy.info/_2009-12-25.htm].

¹⁴ See: Current records of the Committee of the Zhogorku Kenesh, Kyrgyz Republic, for Education, Science, Culture and Sport. Informatsia 10-go GU MVD KR "Obshchaia religioznaia situatsia v KR," in: *Materialy Parlamentskogo slushania "O sostoianii religioznoy situatsii i religioznogo obrazovania v Kyrgyzskoy Respublike"*, 5 marta 2013 g.

In 2009, Uralbek u. T. and Nurmamat u. A (both born in 1996) left for Kuwait.¹⁵ In June 2013, the fact that 10- or 12-year old children from the villages of Bayzak and Chaek of the Naryn Region were sent to Islamic schools in Bangladesh caused a loud scandal.¹⁶

The Azattyk Radio (the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe) learned after prolonged and careful investigation that most Kyrgyz students studied at the Kakrayil Mosque in Dhaka (Bangladesh), a well-known center of Davaatism and the Tablighi Jamaat movement.

There are over 10 thousand madrasahs scattered across Bangladesh, the pupils of which take part in political rallies to demand de-secularization of the country. Their graduates are poorly educated and are less developed than their contemporaries. The number of those who support Wahhabism is steadily growing.¹⁷

This suggests a question: Why are Kyrgyz children sent to madrasahs in Bangladesh at the tender age when intellectual, esthetic, moral, and axiological preferences are just being formed? After all, this will affect their future behavior. Their education is not limited to religious knowledge; children might acquire radical feelings that have nothing in common with the Islamic traditions of their motherland. This means that they might split the Muslim community of Kyrgyzstan.

The SCRA believes that “many of those citizens of our republic who have completed their education come back to set up secret communities of the faithful (khujira) to spread religious teachings unknown in the Central Asian countries. They draw the youth and women into a very dangerous process. More than that, the radically-minded Muslim women have been organizing special female educational groups, which intensifies religious radicalization.”¹⁸

A more careful investigation revealed that many parents rely on incomplete or unreliable information about foreign educational establishments, which means that they choose them at random.

This is equally true of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, secular countries with common historical, intellectual, and cultural traditions. It seems that a single network Islamic University with unified academic curricula, a single methodological and attestation council, magistracy, post-graduate and doctorate in Islamic studies should be set up to educate a Central Asian Islamic intelligentsia and an academic elite.

Educational Level of Muslim Clergy and Mударises

In 1997, according to the decision passed by the 1st Kurultay of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, the SAMK and the State Commission for Religious Affairs at the Government of the KR launched a process of attestation of the imams and mudarises (madrasah teachers) to encourage them to further study, raise their authority among the laity, and strengthen the unity of Islam in the republic.¹⁹

¹⁵ See: Current records of SCRA KR. Information about the results of studies of the state of religious education in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2013.

¹⁶ See: “Zachem kyrgyzskikh detey otpravliaut v medrese Bangladesh?” available at [<http://rus.azattyq.org/content/medrese-uchebe-malchiki-bangladesh/24622169.html>], 22 June, 2012.

¹⁷ See: “Kyrgyzskie ucheniki tainstvennykh medrese v Bangladesh,” available at [<http://rus.azattyq.org/content/kyrgyzstan-bangladesh-medrese/25086376.html>], 26 August, 2013.

¹⁸ Current records of SCRA KR. Information about the results of studies of the state of religious education in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2013.

¹⁹ See: “Imamy derzhat ekzamen,” *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 14 August, 1997, p. 3.

Attestation included three degrees:

1. The highest—knowledge of the Shari‘a, tafsirs of the Quran and hadiths of the Prophet in Arabic.
2. The middle—knowledge of the Shari‘a and the tafsirs of the Quran and hadiths of the Prophet in translation into Turkic languages.
3. The lowest—general knowledge of the Shari‘a.

The examinees were expected to demonstrate their skills in performing Muslim rites in full conformity with the Abu Hanifah maddhab.

In 1997, attestation in the Naryn Region revealed that 30 members of the clergy stopped at the lowest degree, three reached the middle degree, while 18 passed conditionally, and 11 imams failed. In the Issyk Kul Region, the figures were 64, 5, 33, and 17, respectively, and one imam earned the highest degree.²⁰ Despite the fairly harsh conditions, the clergy agreed that attestation was very much needed.

Today, there are about 50 madrasahs in the republic; none has passed the attestation²¹; this means that their diplomas are not recognized by the republic’s state structures. In 2007, the head of the State Agency for the Religious Affairs said: “There are 2 thousand mosques in the republic, with up to 12 thousand clergy serving in them; about 70 percent of them are self-educated with no formal specialized education.”

In this connection, the State Committee for National Security and the Zhogorku Kenesh were asked to draw up a set of documents and organize special training for the imams.

In 2007, the Islamic University and the Faculty of Theology of Osh State University organized training for the first group of 30 clergy; they were taught advanced courses of theology, Quranic studies, and Arabic and were invited to master accounting to be able to compile budgets at the mosque or even at the SAMK level.

Table 1 shows that in 2008 1,346 (68%) out of total 2,062 clergy members took part in attestation; 715 (32%) stayed away for different reasons. Nine hundred and eighty-two (72.9%) passed, while 90 (6.6%) failed.

On the whole, 79 (5.8%) passed with highest points, 163 (12.8%) attained the second category, 763 (56.6%) the third, and 282 (20.9%) passed conditionally, while 90 (6.6%), failed. The faith of eight examinees proved doubtful: they had probably wandered into the profession by sheer chance.

Those who failed were removed from their posts; those who passed conditionally were expected to sit exams at their kaziats three months later.²²

The clergy of the republic’s capital Bishkek and of the Chu and Talas regions demonstrated a lot of activity. The clergy and the kaziat of the Jalal-Abad Region were less than eager (47%).

The attestation commission ranked the regions according to the results: the Bishkek and Chu kaziats showed the best results, followed by the city of Osh, the Nookat, Uzgen and Kara-Suu districts of the Osh Region, the city of Jalal-Abad was the third, while the Kadamjai District of the Batken Region came fourth.

In 2013, the 10th Main Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the KR checked the level of religious education of imams in all regions; the results are shown in Table 2.

²⁰ See: *Ibidem*.

²¹ See: T. Kalmatov, “V Kyrgyzstane vse medrese dolzhny proyti attestatsiu,” available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1189437480>].

²² See: *Islam madaniyaty*, 27 May, 2008, pp. 1-2.

Table 1

**Attestation Results for the Kyrgyz Republic
(May 2008)**

No.	Regions	Total Number of Imams and Mudarises	Took Part in Attestation	Passed	Did not Take Part in Attestation	Causes		Passed by Categories			Conditionally Passed	Failed	The Faiths Proved Doubtful
						Valid	Invalid	I	II	III			
1.	City of Bishkek	86	75	72	11	6	5	23	25	24	2	1	
2.	Chu	236	194	131	42	12	30	15	23	93	48	8	7
3.	Issyk Kul	129	91	47	38	9	29	3	8	36	32	12	
4.	Talas	107	86	33	21	7	14	3	4	26	45	8	
5.	Naryn	138	95	62	43	13	30	—	6	56	26	7	
6.	City of Osh	63	46	40	17	3	14	8	2	30	5	1	1
7.	Osh	573	376	295	196	21	175	16	43	236	54	42	
8.	Jalal-Abad	487	232	178	255	—	255	3	26	149	47	7	
9.	Batken	243	151	124	92	10	82	8	26	113	23	4	
10.	Total	2,062	1,346	982	715	81	634	79	163	763	282	90	8

Source: Islam madaniyaty, 27 May, 2008, pp. 1-2.

Table 2

**Religious Life in Kyrgyzstan's Regions
(Statistics, 2013)**

No.	Regions	Number of Mosques	Number of Namazkans	Imams without Religious Education	Number of Underage Visitors
1.	City of Bishkek	44	11	9	150-1,000
2.	Chu	252	16	144	2,000-2,500
3.	Issyk Kul	118	47	98	1,000-1,100
4.	Talas	100	17	32	80-100
5.	Naryn	90	20	36	470-500
6.	Osh	722	6	386	2,300-8,500
7.	Jalal-Abad	587	40	456	500-1,100
8.	Batken	314	24	265	346-478
9.	City of Osh	58	5	33	80-200
10.	Total	2,285	186	1,459	6,926-15,478

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the KR, in 2013, the situation in the sphere of religious education practically remained the same: “1,459 out of 2,285 imams of mosques do not have a special education.”²³

Many of the Islamic educational establishments were set up on Arab money; however, Turkish specialists are engaged in training and upgrading the qualifications of imams. It should be said that recently Turkish influence has become much more noticeable among the Muslim clergy of Kyrgyzstan. Many officials, researchers, and experts are inclined to borrow the Turkish experience of establishing relations between the state and religion. This is easily explained by the similar history, culture, and traditional specifics of the religious spheres of both countries. Heads of the Islamic educational structures are of a similar opinion: they heavily rely on the Turkish methodology of teaching Islam.

Institutionalization of Islamic Education

I have already written that in 2008 the second stage of reforms of the system of Islamic education began and is still going on.

²³ Current records of the Committee of the Zhogorku Kenesh, Kyrgyz Republic, for Education, Science, Culture, and Sport. Informatsia “O sostoianii religioznoy situatsii i religioznogo obrazovania v KR,” in: *Materialy Parlamentskogo slushania “O sostoianii religioznoy situatsii i religioznogo obrazovania v Kyrgyzskoy Respublike,” 5 marta 2013 g.*

Institutionalization began with the new Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations. Passed on 31 December, 2008, it radically differs from the previous one. Art 6 deals with religion and religious education: the rights and duties of religious organizations that set up and run educational establishments; requirements of the teachers and lecturers; a ban on individual teaching of religion, etc.

This means that from time to time, the problem of religious education and reforms has been raised at the state level.²⁴ The reforms could not be carried out in the absence of a strategy of religious education (there was no continuity in formulating the strategy of the development of religious policies either) and amid the revolutions of 2005 and 2010, which changed the regimes and replaced the SAMK heads.

In 2008, the Eurasian Fund, officials of the SAMK, and experts of the Center of Social Studies at the American University of Central Asia pooled forces and financial resources to implement a project called Integration of the Institutes of Islamic Education into Wide Public Circles and the Problems of Modernization of the Islamic Educational Institutions.

Working together, these structures produced the Development Concept of Islamic Education and a teaching program for the subject of Islamic theology, which included both religious and secular disciplines and recommendations on how the quality of Islamic education in the republic can be improved and how its standards can be integrated into Kyrgyz society.

It was pointed out that the state had to fund, at least partially, the process of introducing secular disciplines into the curricula of Islamic educational structures. The project remained on paper for lack of money.

In 2008-2009, the draft law was discussed by the SCRA KR on the basis of the general model of religious education suggested by Kanybek Osmonaliev, the then head of the State Commission for Religious Affairs.

In 2013, Kanybek Osmonaliev, as Chairman of the Committee of Zhogorku Kenesh for Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, drafted a law expected to create the standards of religious education, organize educational activities, fortify the material and technical base of educational establishments, and register foreign educational establishments (centers, missions, and departments). The draft suggested that all religious educational structures should add from 30 to 40 percent of secular disciplines to their curricula²⁵ to make their diplomas acceptable by the state and provide a broader education for the Islamic intelligentsia.

On 5 March, 2013, the Kyrgyz parliament organized hearings on the religious situation and religious education in the Kyrgyz Republic. The audience listened to speaker of the Zhogorku Kenesh A. Zheenbekov, his deputy T. Zulpukarov, and Vice Premier of the KR K. Talieva. They agreed that the law would solve the problem of compatibility of the secular and religious diplomas to allow graduates of religious educational establishments to be employed in science, education, and civil service.

Many of the religious leaders, including those belonging to the SAMK and ROC, were dead set against the draft. Mufti R. Egemberdiev argued that “the law will not only fail to solve the problems, it will even multiply them” and that “the Law on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations still in force has a Section ‘Education and Religion’ that can simply be supplemented.”²⁶

²⁴ See: *O monitoringe deiatelnosti gosudarstvennykh organov v realizatsii religioznykh prav i svobod*, ed. by O.Sh. Mamyusupova, State Commission for Religious Affairs under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, Bishkek, 2004, p. 190.

²⁵ See: Current records of the Committee of the Zhogorku Kenesh, Kyrgyz Republic, for Education, Science, Culture and Sport. Informatsia “O sostoianii religioznoy situatsii i religioznogo obrazovania v KR.”

²⁶ *Ibidem*; *Suggestions and amendments of the SAMK to the draft law of the KR on Religious Education and Religious Educational Structures*.

State licensing and state standards of religious education, of which much was said in the draft law, invited vehement polemics. According to the demands of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, all educational establishments should have an adequate material and technical base, adequately educated teaching staff, a building that meets all architectural requirements, a developed infrastructure of classrooms, latest information and computer technologies, libraries, etc. Each faculty should have at least two Doctors of Science and each chair at least two PhDs among their teachers and lecturers.

Many of those who headed Islamic educational establishments knew only too well that they would not live up to these requirements and, therefore, would not be licensed.

On the one hand, it was up to the SAMK to formulate requirements and suggest measures that would improve the quality of Islamic education and strengthen material and technical base: state accreditation of diplomas would allow graduates to enroll in civil service and introduce Islamic values into everyday life.

So far, Tursunbek Bakir uulu, deputy of the Zhogorku Kenesh, is promoting Islamic values practically single-handedly. His election program stresses his determination to introduce Islamic ideas into the economy, politics, and everyday life.

On the other hand, all 77 Islamic educational establishments are private property, the owners of which are not alien to attracting money from foreign Muslim sponsors and centers convinced that a system of Islamic education is the best object of their donations.

Unlike some of its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan has not yet acquired state Islamic educational establishments to compete with the privately owned. The heads of the private Islamic schools and universities referred to the experience of the Russian Federation when talking of state support of the teaching of secular disciplines in Islamic educational establishments.

On 24 December, 2013, the heads of private Islamic schools addressed the republic's leaders with an open letter in which they expressed their concern about criticism of Islam. They asked for state support and said that "the sides need a constructive dialog rather than criticism and accusations. This alone can help preserve peace and harmony in the state."²⁷

At the same time, discussions of the draft law urged the SAMK to complete its Concept of Islamic Education and Reform of Its System. It created curricula and programs for the subject of Islamic Theology to be taught at madrasahs and higher educational establishments. SAMK officials inspected all of them to find out that several madrasahs fell short of the standards; they were closed.²⁸

In 2008, the republic began trying to institutionalize the Islamic education system; in 2010 these efforts were interrupted by a revolution and regime change.

The process was restarted in 2013 when all Islamic educational establishments were structured and united into a single multi-layer system:

- primary Islamic Koranic course at mosques;
- secondary Islamic educational establishments (madrasahs);
- higher Islamic educational establishments (institutes and universities);
- post-graduate structures.

The SAMK came up with a draft concept of Islamic education and *a program of action*:

- The council of the Ulema and the Muftiat of the SAMK should create and approve educational standards for the subject of Islamic Theology for each level of Islamic education;

²⁷ "DUM Kyrgyzstana: Islam v respublike v poslednee vremia stal ob'ektom ostroy politizatsii," 27 December, 2013, available at [<http://www.islamsng.com/kgz/news/7401>].

²⁸ Interview with assistant of the mufti Yu.A. Loma, 24 December, 2013.

- Elaborate curricula in full conformity with the standards of Islamic education;
- Introduce secular disciplines into the curricula of the Islamic educational establishments.

A workgroup of experts acting under the SAMK (muftiat) aegis is expected to shoulder the main burden for implementing this concept. An integrated system of Islamic education will appear in two or three years. The program will be implemented in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education of the KR.

Institutionalization of the system of Islamic education has not been completed; in the future, state accreditation and licensing will increase their prestige, put them on an equal basis with the other educational establishments, either state or municipal, and change their status, which will make them eligible (within certain limits) for state support.

Conclusion

The above suggests the following conclusions:

The developing system of Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan will allow the state to snatch the initiative from foreign educational establishments (in the sphere of Islamic education and theological courses in secular universities). It is advisable to set up a single Islamic University network for all post-Soviet Central Asian states to train masters, PhD candidates, and doctors of science in Islamic theology and create regional Islamic intellectual elite.

To successfully deal with *the confrontation between secular and Islamic ideas about the world and the mounting threat that the religious and ideological dividing lines might finally coincide with the social division* created by de-secularization of society, the absence of state ideology, and the low living standards of the greater part of the nation, the state should *help the Islamic clergy* set up a high-quality Islamic education system complete with secular components.

The draft Law on Religious Education and Religious Educational Establishments, which aroused a lot of interest across the country, invigorated the process of licensing the Islamic educational establishments when the SAMK joined the process.

The above points to certain problems that can be resolved with the help of the following measures:

- Heads of the Islamic educational establishments and the SAMK should join forces to amend the law and offer their addenda;
- The Islamic schools and universities should be invited to undergo voluntary licensing, which will make them more competitive;
- The law should be amended in order to give religious universities a chance to offer their programs for state accreditation.

It is advisable to set up a Fund of Islamic Culture and Education under the President of the KR to maintain permanent contact with international Islamic organizations. This fund will be able to accumulate the money coming from abroad to promote Islam in the Kyrgyz Republic by funding the pilot Islamic educational establishments, creating a structure designed to upgrade the qualifications of the clergy and preachers, and carrying out regular study of the religious traditions of the Kyrgyz people, in which the clergy and academics will be involved together.

The tradition of fairly weak religiosity among the Kyrgyz that goes back into history, and the 70-odd years of state atheism cannot but affect the current situation: the Kyrgyz are not alien to em-

bracing other religions, the clergy and common Muslims are known to violate the Shari‘a, religious attributes and symbols are used for personal purposes (in business practices and amassing wealth), and shaman and Tengrian relicts are popular, while there is a fairly contradictory attitude to Islam. This means that the religiosity of the Kyrgyz is a very special phenomenon. The formula “Muslim according to nationality” is extremely superficial and, more likely than not, does not go farther than certain attributes and formal observance of rites.
